

THE HAUNTED ROCK.

BY CHARLES F. F. WOODS.

Some years ago, through the interest of a relation, I received the appointment of a lighthouse keeper. I did not much care about the work, as I dreaded its dullness; but I was young and beginning the world, and could not afford to be nice in my selection of an occupation.

The remarks of my friends, when they heard of my new career, were entirely not calculated to reassure me. Most of my companions were in one way or the other connected with the sea, and all the congratulations I got upon my advancement in life were ominous shakes of the head and muttered remarks as to there being "queer tales about these lighthouse chaps;" the concluding practical advice being generally, "I wouldn't take it if I was you, Tom."

This was certainly rather calculated to throw a damper upon my new employ; but, as I argued with myself, if I did not take it, I had nothing better to look to, and I would not throw myself upon my friends; so determined to make the best of the matter, I went down to Blackwell to be instructed in my new duties. It was not long before I made myself sufficiently acquainted with them as to be as well at the management of the lamps and apparatus; and was at length pronounced fit to undertake the duties of supernumerary lighthouse-keeper.

These supernumeraries have to hold themselves in readiness to proceed to any part of the coast where they may be required to relieve others who, from sickness or other causes, are removed from their posts. One morning after the regular service was completed, I received a sudden intimation that I was required to proceed to take charge of a lighthouse on the coast of Wales. On making inquiries about the new charge to which I was posted, all I could learn was, that the legitimate keeper had deserted his employ some months before, and had not since been heard of; that his place had been temporarily filled up by a man from a neighboring village, who it was hoped would have continued in it; but that he had recently insisted upon giving up his berth, alleging as his reason that the illness of the life was more than he could bear. With this information (which was all the people at headquarters either could or would give me), I was forced to be content, and started off for Wales that very afternoon, arriving at the scene of my future labors on the next day.

At the first glance, the prospect was not alluring. It was at the end of October, on one of those dull, boisterous, dark days on which all Nature seems mourning the brightness of the summer that's past, and lamenting the rigor of the winter that's to come. The wind came sometimes in strong chill puffs that seemed to send the cold to one's very bones; sometimes in soft sighs that moaned dimly through the half-bare trees, sending the leaves slowly fluttering from the branches to rot upon the oozy ground. The desolation of the scene seemed even to have infected the few cottages by which I was surrounded, and in which the only signs of life appeared to be clouds of steam (evidently from washing) which came through the open doors, while a few straggling women went in and out on errands, sometimes chiding the groups of milk-cows that clustered on the threshold, greedily eyeing the pools of mud and water beyond.

Even had I wished to possess it, I saw that there was little information to be got there; and as I was tired with my journey and anxious to be out of the cold as soon as possible, I put what effects I had into a boat (which I hired with some little difficulty), and set off for the lighthouse, which was built upon a rock at some distance from the land. On the way thither I thought that the boatmen eyed me somewhat curiously, and were not very talkative, simply halting my vessel at the wharves, and then, with a few words, sometimes chiding the groups of milk-cows that clustered on the threshold, greedily eyeing the pools of mud and water beyond.

My new abode consisted merely of the lantern, in which the lights burned, and the wash-room, furnished with a bed, chair, and table, and such ordinary and domestic necessaries as the keeper required. A flight of stairs led to the door by which the building was entered, and a lower flight seemed to lead to cellars or recesses of some sort; my companion did not, however, show me these, as he said they were never used, and it wasn't worth while going down in the cold. The evening drew quickly on; and as the autumn twilight grew darkling over the waters, the sea and wind both seemed to rise, and the crash of the breakers as they leaped fiercely upon the rock, and the whistling of the gale, were anything but agreeable adjuncts to a residence desolate enough in itself.

For the first hour or two of the evening I was busily employed in learning how the lamps were trimmed, lighted, etc., and in reading the regulations by which the keeper was to be guided. When I had, as I thought, made myself sufficiently acquainted with the routine of the life that was before me, I sat down with my quondam companion, whose name was Morgan, and as we smoked our pipes by the fire, tried to gather from him the particulars of the keeper's disappearance, and why he himself was giving up the situation. Morgan, however, was anything but communicative; he said he knew very little about his predecessor; he was a sulky, gloomy sort of chap, who lived here with a very pretty wife, and was said to drink hard at times (but that he didn't know about.) One night the lamps were not lighted; and when the coast-guard put out to see what was amiss, the lighthouse was found deserted, and as a good many metal articles of value were missing, it was supposed that the keeper and his wife had stolen them and made off.

As the night wore on, I noticed that Morgan seemed to grow fidgety and uneasy, and applied himself, rather more than I thought

the authorities would have approved of, to a case-bottle of spirits on the table. It seemed to have no effect on him, however; and he at length volunteered to look after the lights that night, so that I might have a good rest after my journey. I was too tired to gainsay this, and in spite of an uneasy feeling, which I could not account for even to myself, soon fell into a troubled sleep. Whether it was the novelty of my situation or not, I hardly know, but during the first portion of the night I scarcely slept half an hour consecutively; and when I awoke, hearing the never-ceasing roar of the waves, contrasting with the deep silence within the building, I always, in spite of myself, began wondering why the last keeper had left, what sort of a woman his wife was, and whether he had really stolen the missing things? These speculations seemed so absurd, that I tried hard to dismiss them, but without success; and it was only as the dawn was breaking that I fell into a deep unbroken slumber, from which I did not awake till the morning was far advanced.

When I awoke I found it was a bright fresh morning, the gale having died away to a soft southwest wind. As I stood by one of the open windows, how different the scene appeared to the gloom of yesterday! Where the sunlight fell upon the still heaving billows it turned them, now to masses of sheeny opal, now into cascades and diamonds, and the spray was thrown high into the air. In the distance, like snowy sea-birds, appeared the white sails of the fishing craft; and as the fresh breeze cooled my fevered cheek, my spirits rose wonderfully, and I anticipated almost with delight the calm hours I might spend here with my books, surrounded by the ever-changing beauty of the ocean. Morgan now came down from the "lantern," and pointed to the breakfast he had got for me; his own, he said, had been finished long since, and as soon as I was ready he would go on shore. Although I could not help being surprised at the almost nervous haste the man displayed to be off, I now had nothing to urge against it. I therefore finished my repast as expeditiously as I could, and having lowered the boat attached to the lighthouse, we pulled on shore almost in silence. When within half a mile of the land, Morgan, who had been thinking deeply, suddenly stopped pulling, and very abruptly asked me if I had any arms in the lighthouse. Somewhat startled at the question, I replied that I had a revolver, but it was unloaded, as I didn't see how I could require it. "Better load it," was the hurried answer; "it's lonesome at times out yonder, and you'll feel more comfortable if you've something by you as you can trust to."

We were close to the land now, and in a minute or two my companion sprang ashore and hurriedly wishing us good-bye, strode away through the trees, and was soon lost to sight. I know no one in the little village; so thought I would go up to the coast-guard station, as I had been desired to put myself under the orders of the officer in charge. There was no one there, at the time I arrived, but an old man-of-war's man, to whom, however, I duly reported myself, and got him to give me some information as to where to get my provisions, etc. This he very good-naturedly did, and while going down to the village, I questioned him about the late keeper's desertion, which somehow or other always seemed strangely to interest me. My new friends, however, could tell me no more than Morgan had, viz., that the man and his wife were supposed to have stolen the articles that were missing, and decamped. I spent a good bit of the afternoon in making my little purchases, and returned to the lighthouse about 4 o'clock, in order to be in time to light the lamps before the approach of dusk. After the boat was securely fastened up, and the door locked and barred, I must confess that a dull sense of loneliness fell upon me. I shook it off, however, and busied myself with my work; and preparing and discussing my evening meal, I got through the time pretty well till 8 o'clock, when I went up into the lantern to see that all was working correctly, and then sat down to commence my first night's watch, alone in the midst of the waters.

All anticipated evils seem smaller when really near. I had all along so much dreaded the dullness of my night watchings, that now I had really commenced one of them, I was agreeably disappointed at finding it much more endurable than I had expected. There was certainly an oppressive silence reigning through the building, and the monotonous boom of the waves dashing against the rock was not inspiring; but I had letters to write home, plenty of books to read, and my lights to visit every hour; so that altogether the night passed quickly enough away; and when the dawn broke, I went to bed with the hopeful exclamation that "it wasn't so bad, after all."

The following day was Saturday, and I determined to devote it to putting my room in order. I did not rise till nearly 2 o'clock, and spent the remainder of the afternoon in arranging my books, clothes, etc. At the evening drew on I trimmed and lighted my lamps, and then read till nearly 9. About this time I began to find a difficulty in concentrating my attention to my book. In spite of myself my thoughts kept wandering to their old theme—the late keeper's desertion of his post, and what sort of a life he had led in the room in which I was sitting, to induce him to disappear so mysteriously. I roused myself by a strong effort of will from these fruitless speculations, and went to the window to see what sort of a night it was. There was no moon, and as far as the eye could reach, nothing was visible but the black heaving waves purposelessly swaying to and fro, sometimes tinged by a faint streak of phosphorescent light; as the white ridge in which they culminated rippled slowly away. It seemed very lonely to be built up there in that waste of waters, and a sort of cold chill seemed to settle on my heart as I began to revolve all sorts of improbable contingencies, such as having a fit, or the lighthouse taking fire. Altogether I felt myself gradually getting into such a state of nervous excitement, that I could hardly bear my own thoughts. So determined, if possible, to break the spell that seemed creeping over me, I mixed a stiff glass of grog, and sat down with my pipe by the fire. There was nothing to disturb my thoughts, and I sat conjuring up all sorts of home scenes, listening absently to the half-minute click of the lights as they revolved above, the only sound that broke the dead silence surrounding me. The clock had just struck eleven, and I was thinking of visiting my lights, when suddenly a confused noise of struggling and curses, intermingled with the sound of heavy blows, arose from beneath me. I sprang from my chair, my first impression being that thieves had broken into the lighthouse. While I stood listening, rapid steps ascended the stair; and as I turned to seize the poker as the nearest weapon available, the door flew violently open, and to my intense horror, the sound of oaths and struggling commenced close by me, but not a thing which could cause it was visible. The noise barely lasted a minute, a lifetime as it seemed

to me, and appeared again to descend the stair. For a moment all was still, and I was beginning to try and persuade myself that I had been the victim of some horrible hallucination, when a wild shrill scream, the agony of which haunts me still, rang through the silent building, and a woman's voice exclaimed, "George, George! for God's sake don't murder me!" A dull thud, as of some heavy substance falling to the ground, a low gurgling noise, and all was still.

Palsied with horror, I stood leaning on the chair to which I had clung for support, every nerve strained in agonized expectation of a renewal of the disturbance; but minute after minute went by, marked by the sound of the revolving lights, and all remained as still as the grave. Little by little I recovered power over my thoughts, and sat down, trying to account for the scene I had just gone through. Could any joke have been played on me? That hardly seemed possible, for I had barred and locked the door myself, and the key still hung beside me. I could scarcely bring myself to believe it was anything supernatural, for I had been all my life a skeptic as to such things; but how to account for the scuffling in the room closed by me? I at length became more emboldened by the perfect quiet that reigned, and got out my revolver and loaded it carefully, and summoning up all the resolution I possessed, determined to go down and examine the cellars where the noises had apparently begun and ended. Taking a closed lantern in one hand and my revolver in the other, I cautiously descended the stair, looking around and behind me. I must confess, with fear and trembling. Nothing extraordinary was, however, visible; the door was barred and fastened as I had left it, and all the things that lay about were in precisely the same positions as when I had seen them last. Not a sound was to be heard but the dash of the waves, which broke upon the sea around and about me now. I was somewhat reassured by finding nothing as I had left it on coming in; but as I prepared to descend the lower winding stair leading to the cellars, I felt a smothered sensation upon my chest, and my heart beat so loud that it would have been audible to any one standing near. Down the narrow stair I went cautiously, the air becoming colder at every step, while the little light that came from the lamp I carried showed that the walls were dank with moisture, and covered with fungoid growths. When I arrived at the bottom I found myself opposite a strongly-built door, not apparently fastened. The clammy sweat rolled down my face, and it was some minutes before I could summon up enough courage to thrust the door open with my foot. Holding the lantern forward, but almost dreading to see what its light might reveal, I found that two or three steps led down to a large cellar, made apparently in the rock itself. 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